

SMITHSONIAN MISCELLANEOUS COLLECTIONS
VOLUME 123, NUMBER 6

A NEW PICTOGRAPHIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF SITTING BULL

(WITH SEVEN PLATES)

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(PUBLICATION 4180)

CITY OF WASHINGTON
PUBLISHED BY THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
JANUARY 20, 1955

The Lord Baltimore Press
BALTIMORE, MD., U. S. A.

A NEW PICTOGRAPHIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SITTING BULL

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Sitting Bull's fame as a warrior and Indian patriot is well established and is likely to remain so for many years to come. There is hardly a person to whom his name, if not his exploits, is not well known. As was the custom among Plains Indians, Sitting Bull was proud of his exploits and recorded them in the form of pictographic paintings.¹

In 1947 Miss Alice Quimby passed away at Niles, Mich., leaving behind several interesting memorabilia of Sitting Bull as well as a set of his autobiographical pictographs. All are now a part of the permanent possessions of the Fort St. Joseph Historical Association Museum at Niles. Miss Quimby's father, Capt. Horace Quimby, was stationed at Fort Randall, Dakota Territory, as a Regimental Quartermaster between 1881 and 1883. It was during this time that Sitting Bull drew and colored for little Alice the pictographs appearing with this article, in return for food and other commodities given to him by her parents.

More has been written about Sitting Bull than any other prominent Indian. Much debate has appeared in print as to his personality, courage, motives, and actions. The following brief sketch is probably as close to the facts of his life as can be determined. He was born on the Grand River, in what is now South Dakota, about 1834, as a member of the Hunkpapa Teton Sioux, a warlike, aggressive, and self-respecting group of people. He distinguished himself as a hunter at ten years of age and as a warrior four years later. During his early twenties he rose rapidly in influence within his band and was soon recognized as a leader in both peace and war.

In the 1860's the Indians of the Plains vigorously resisted the encroachment of the whites and of Indian groups who were responding to the pressures upon them. Sitting Bull first burst into national fame when he led the raid in 1866 against Fort Buford in Dakota Territory.

¹ Stirling, M. W., Three pictographic autobiographies of Sitting Bull. *Smithsonian Misc. Coll.*, vol. 97, No. 5, 1938.

His refusal, and the refusal of the main body of the Sioux, to become "reservation Indians" led to General Sheridan's campaign and to Custer's massacre on the Little Bighorn River in Montana in 1876. Sitting Bull's participation in that famous defeat has been argued for years by both Indians and whites. His name, however, became inextricably linked with that Indian victory.

The last gasp and last hope for freedom by the Sioux expressed itself in the Ghost Dance, which was organized on the Standing Rock Agency some time in 1890 at the invitation of Sitting Bull. Panic-stricken whites saw this revival of Sioux nationalism as a prelude to another bloody and costly uprising and promptly made plans to suppress it. Resistance to arrest led to Sitting Bull's death at the hands of agency police on December 15, 1890.

There were many Indian leaders, contemporaries of Sitting Bull, who had equal and even superior claims to fame and yet never shared with him the spotlight of publicity. His reputation rests to a large extent upon his association with the Custer fight and the sensation-starved newspapers of the post-Civil War era. Newspapermen assigned to the "Indian Wars" exaggerated their releases and even manufactured hair-raising stories to satisfy their editors' demands for action and drama. Sitting Bull became and still is a controversial figure: rogue and coward to a few, fearless and faithful adherent to Indian ideals to most.

The Plains Indian cultural pattern prescribed success in war and in the theft of horses as the two legitimate avenues to distinction. Sitting Bull evidently had a lot of ability to run off horses successfully, as can be surmised from his pictographic records. In pictographs 2 and 11 (pls. 1 and 6) the horse carries the brand of the United States Army, attesting to his skill as a horse thief. In warfare he could lay claim to 63 coups against enemy Indians and whites by 1870. The privilege of reciting his exploits around the council fire was generally not enough for the man who wanted to preserve their memory in a more permanent manner. Sitting Bull, like his Plains contemporaries, kept a visual account of his coups through pictographs, a primitive form of picture writing. In aboriginal days these were painted on animal skins with indigenous pigments and porous buffalo-bone "brushes." As soon as available, white man's paper, pencil, pen, watercolor, and crayon were quickly accepted. There is an unknown number of pictographic records of winter counts, buffalo hunts, raids, biographies, and historic events in public museums and private collections. These were in many cases originally produced because food-hungry Indians soon learned that they had a market value to souvenir-hungry soldiers,

travelers, and residents on the Plains. Sitting Bull made three known pictographic autobiographies besides the one illustrated with this article.² It is understandable that none of the Quimby specimens show encounters with white soldiers or civilians since Sitting Bull was a prisoner at the time with an uncertain legal status. Descriptions of current locations of the Kimball, Smith, and Pettinger pictographs can be found in Stirling's article.

There are 13 pictographs in the Quimby collection. The last is not complete and appears on the back inside cover of the ledger in which all were originally bound. Though now loose, they were in a record book kept by Captain Quimby as Quartermaster of the 31st Regiment of Infantry. It is amusing to note that an inventory was made of the regiment's supplies while it was stationed in Texas and that foodstuffs are largely missing or in short order.

The flyleaf of the ledger contains the identifications for the individual pictographs. There is no way of ascertaining, however, whether the tabulation was made at Sitting Bull's dictation or from memory at a later date.

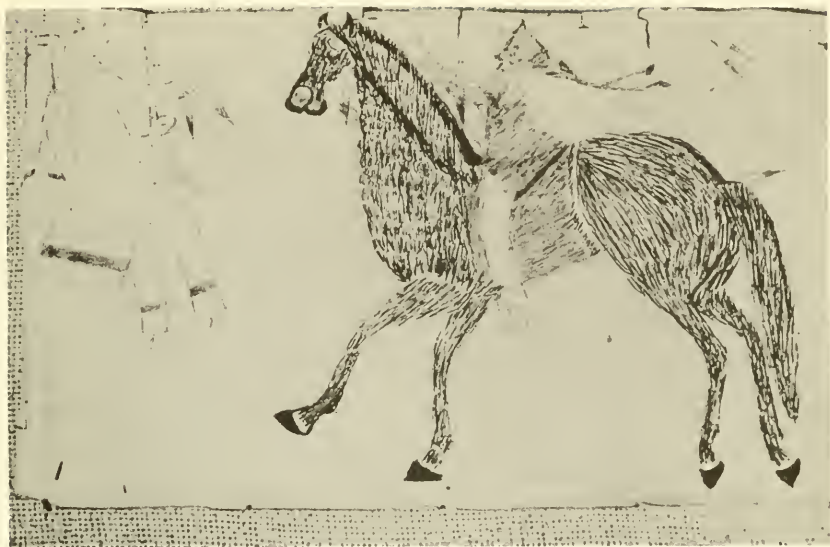
Sitting Bull's pictographic efforts were drawn in pencil and ink and painted in with watercolors. He did not restrain himself to a set pattern in choosing combinations of media. In pictograph 2 (pl. 1), for example, the horse's mane, tail, hoofs, and legs, and the human eyes are done in ink, while the same horse's nostrils and eyes are penciled in. In the same figure there is a touch of red to the war bonnet, with white and yellow coloration on the gunstock. In contrast, pictograph 4 (pl. 2) is done carefully in ink and pencil. In most cases Sitting Bull reserved colors for himself and his horses, and kept his antagonist in the black and gray of pencil and pen.

Though colors must have had specific significance in earlier days, they were no doubt chosen at random by the later Plains artists. Since horses were so valuable and important to the Indian, it can be safely surmised that Sitting Bull chose colors for his steeds that corresponded to their original hues. The events depicted in the Quimby collection are autobiographical but not necessarily in chronological order. The first known Sitting Bull pictographs (Kimball) were drawn around 1870 and are in typical Plains Indian style of flat planes and profiles only. The later Smith and Pettinger series reflect Sitting Bull's ability as a student of Rudolph Cronau, illustrator for the Leipzig Gartenlaube on the High Plains during the late 70's and early 80's. In the Quimby collection there is no attempt to show the face in three-

² See Stirling, M. W., *op. cit.*

quarters or full, but horse figures are shaded carefully in an attempt to depict rounding of the body.

Sitting Bull's "medicine," a bird variously interpreted as a falcon or an eagle, appears on occasion in all the extant pictographic collections. It is found either on his war shield or above his head. His personal glyph, the seated bull, though present in the Kimball records, is missing in the Quimby collection. The Smith pictographs do not carry his glyph, but each is signed. While a fugitive in Canada, Sitting Bull was taught to write his name by Gus Hedderich, who operated a trading post at Woody Mountain. A specimen of his handwriting is also found in the Niles Museum's Sitting Bull exhibit. In a bold and sure hand he wrote "Sitting Bull" on stationery of the "Randall House," where "persons visiting the post will find comfortable Quarters and a good table" as well as a "full view of drills and parades." One can be sure that a view of the Indians camped in and around the fort was included at no extra charge.



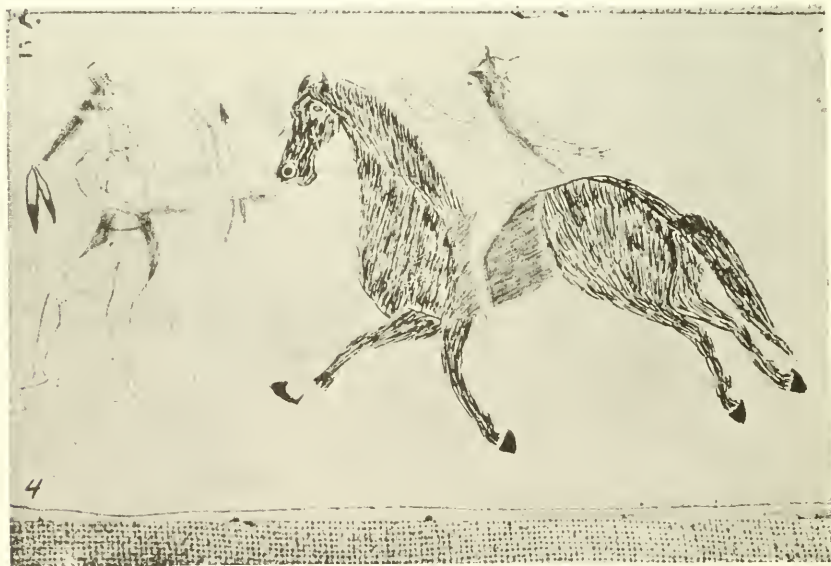
1. Sitting Bull scores a coup with his lance upon an Assiniboin. Headgear is the capote, commonly worn by the Sioux on their war expeditions. This is the same fight as shown in the Smith Collection, No. 21.



2. Sitting Bull, riding a branded, and therefore stolen, horse kills an Assiniboin with gunfire.



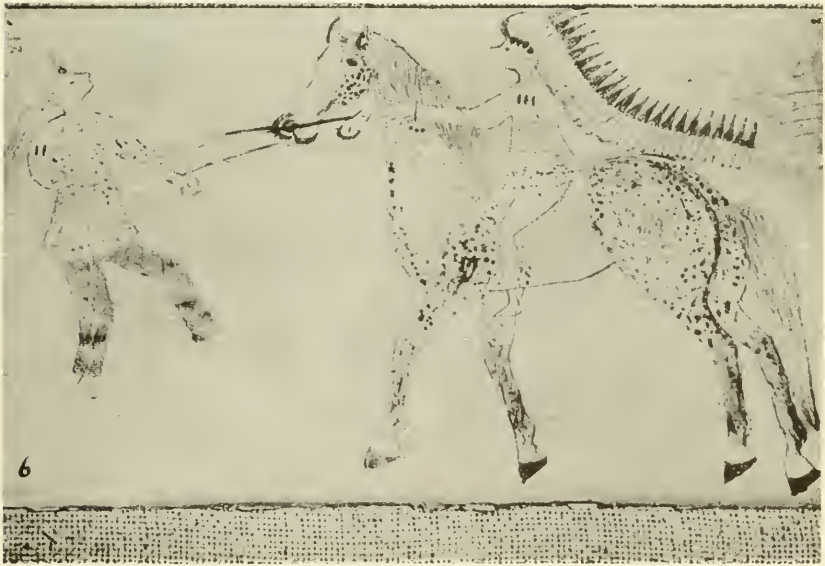
3. Sitting Bull, wearing buffalo horns, dispatches a Crow with his lance. This pictograph and No. 13 of the Pettinger Series are of the same engagement.



4. A Crow warrior, armed with a bow and arrow, being charged by Sitting Bull. Picture probably incomplete, with lance missing from Sitting Bull's hands. This is possibly the fight as seen in Kimball Pictograph No. 1.



5. Sitting Bull exchanging gunfire with a Crow. Copious use of red paint indicates extensive wounds of enemy. Probably the same encounter depicted in the Smith (No. 12) and the Pettinger (No. 1) collections.



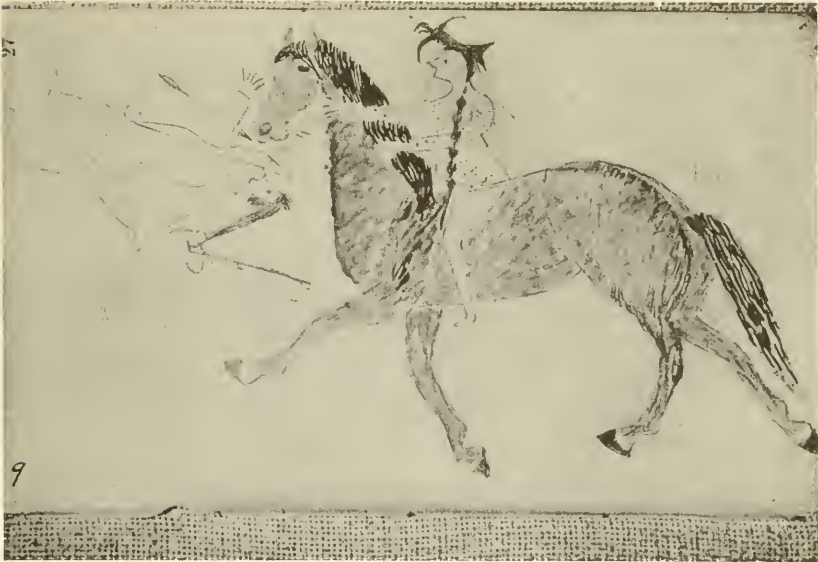
6. An Assiniboin wounds Sitting Bull in the hip, but pays with his life in the engagement.



7. A beautifully attired Gros Ventres lanced by Sitting Bull. The weasel skins on the enemy indicate he was a chief. Same as No. 11. Smith collection, with error of identification in Quimby pictures? Note striking similarity of the enemy's costume in both.



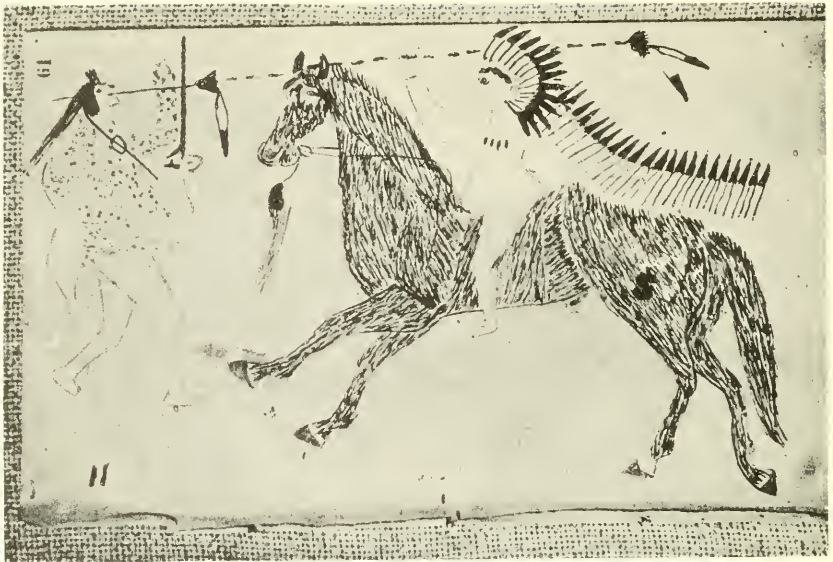
8. Sitting Bull shoots a Crow who wounds him in the arm with an arrow.



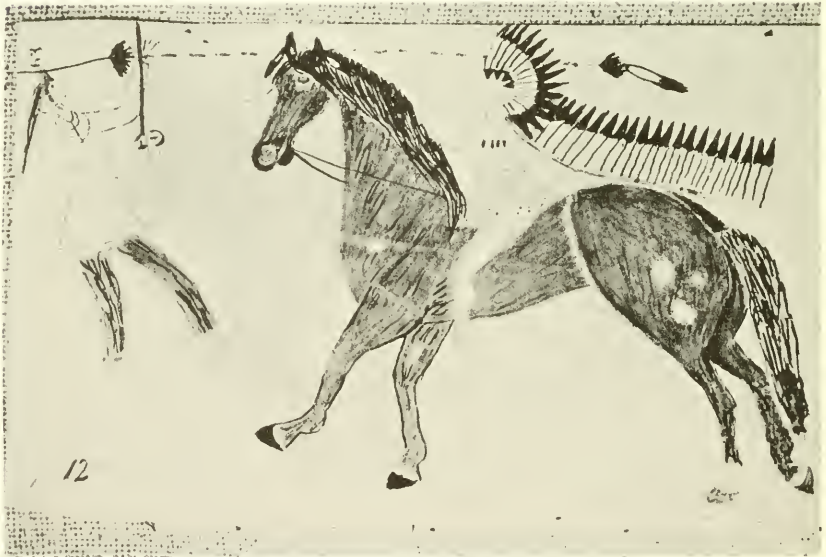
9. An Assiniboin, armed with a gun, is killed by Sitting Bull, carrying a bow and arrow.



10. Sitting Bull adds a coup to his count by lancing a Flathead armed with bow and arrow. This may be the same engagement shown in the Smith (No. 16) and Pettinger (No. 7) pictographs.



11. One of Sitting Bull's successful encounters with a Crow while riding a stolen horse. The same pictograph is seen in the Smith collection, No. 17.



12. A Crow is defeated by Sitting Bull's lance even though he is armed with a gun.



13. Incomplete — horse only.